How do we know that the results that we are seeing are actually because of our interventions and the changes that we are making?" This is the key question facing Fellows as they arrived in Austria for the Salzburg Global program Better Health Care: How do we learn about improvement?

The program, in partnership with the USAID Assist Project and with support from the New Venture Fund, is bringing many returning Fellows to Salzburg to build on work begun in 2012 at the session Making Health Care Better in Low and Middle Income Economies: What are the next steps and how do we get there? Since that program four years ago, the field of health care quality improvement science has evolved, prompting the return to Salzburg.

Again led by M. Rashad Massoud, Director, USAID Health Care Improvement Project, Senior Vice President, University Research Co., LLC/Quality & Performance Institute, as the Session Chair, this year’s cohort of 60 Fellows from 25 countries will consider how we know whether the results achieved in improving health and health care can be attributed to the intervention conducted.

Improved process level data and outcome level data have made it possible to show improvements in health care, such as the reductions in complications in care and in mortality, for example in pre-natal mortality.

As Massoud explains: "[In India], over an 18 month period, they had worked on 270,000 deliveries and were able to reduce pre-natal mortality by 12.7%... In view of such accomplishments, we are being asked a lot of questions... how do you know that the results that you are getting are truly because of what you are doing, and that the changes you are making are causing these results? The answer is that we do have our time series charts to show that there has been a change, but we do not know if that change is necessarily due to what we have done or that it is only because of what we have done and it is not because of something else that is [also] going on."

These questions now pose the next challenge in the evolution of the science of improvement, and while no single, simple answer will be found in Salzburg, the global gathering seeks to help in the design, implementation and evaluation of improvement to uncover which interventions are most effective at achieving sustained results in health outcomes.

While no one Fellow in Salzburg is expected to have the one, simple answer, it is hoped that the collection of expertise gathered for the program this week will help compile the various parts of the solution.